

Lexical Variation and the Need For a Learner's Dictionary
R. David Zorc
Language Research Center, McNeil Technologies

Summary:

In addressing the difficulty of understanding numerous words in highly-inflected languages, in those with complex sound changes, or in those where tone or accent homographs abound, the following conclusions may be drawn:

1. Research for learner's dictionaries should be endorsed and funded. These products are essential for English-speaking learners and prove equally useful to mother-tongue speakers, who wind up being the ad hoc or de facto teachers of our students, whether in graduate school or contract courses.
2. Many of the existing dictionaries are the product of a certain amount of linguistic arrogance insofar as words are entered by root. While this may not be an obstacle for many of the entries, when either complex morphophonemic changes or a series of multiple affixes are involved even a mother-tongue speaker cannot locate the entry. In the face of such difficulty, how can a student fare any better?

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

While one is usually grateful to find *any* dictionary for many of the less-commonly taught or low-density languages, this does not diminish the enormous need for learner's dictionaries of these languages. More often than not, dictionaries that are available are virtually unusable to beginning students. Furthermore, we should not fool ourselves; these tools can prove (and have proven) to be enormously helpful to mother-tongue speakers.

There are a lot of words (or word-combinations) that are far from clear to even educated native speakers. These include coinages by national institutes, the jargon of various professions, and the slang of the "person on the street." This being the case, the beginning or even intermediate student will need a great deal of help.

2. COINAGE

The addition of "new words" to a language can be done by creation, borrowing, or revitalizing previously existing terms. Dissatisfied with the huge number of Spanish loans, the Philippine Institute of National Language in the late 1940's began a process of coining vocabulary. To replace the almost universally known **siya** 'seat, chair,' the word **salumpuwit** was suggested – 60 years later that word is passively known or understood while **siya** actively persists.

Xhosa **Umgqo-Siseko** 'Constitution' is formed from **umgqo** 'policy, method' and the verb **-seka** 'found, establish.' Mother-tongue speakers who left the country prior to the abandonment of Apartheid generally do not understand this coinage and have rendered it 'established policy' or 'foundation document.'

The *Tagalog Slang Dictionary* project (Zorc & San Miguel, 1991) was initiated on the basis of an editorial which read, in part, "Two members of Cory (Aquino)'s cabinet are K.G.B." (Dalawang miembro ng kabinete ni Cory ay K.G.B.) The intrusion of the Russian espionage organization that high up in Philippine politics would certainly be a matter of concern! It turns out that one of the major areas of Tagalog slang is the irreverent treatment of abbreviations and

acronyms, so that KGB stood for **Kon gabi bakla** [lit: if night gay] 'closet homosexual.' In a similar vein, **C.I.A.** stood for "Certified Imelda (Marcos) Admirer."

Besides the introduction of new or specialized meaning for an indigenous word, there are various degrees of assimilation for loanwords. In Rwanda, an 'alcoholic beverage' can be called **inzoga** (a local brew), **arukoro** (assimilated French), or **alcool** (unassimilated French).

In the selection of articles for the *Oromo Newspaper Reader* (Zorc, Tucho & Barna 1996), we prudently avoided those that had so many neologisms as to be unintelligible for Oromos who left the country prior to 1992 (when a Romanized orthography was established). This decision was made when one headline was rendered by our consultant 'Government Proposes Plan,' while we later discovered it actually meant 'Government Exposes Plot.' One of the key words (**saaxil baasuu** 'to expose') only came into widespread usage after 1995.

3. SPECIALIZATION

Specialization involves broadening the application of an already existing word to cover a specific new meaning.

Xhosa **umphathiswa**, **abaphathiswa** originally meant 'authority (s.o. put in charge, invested with authority);' however, in post-Apartheid South Africa it has been extended to include: 'department head' (as at a university) or, more specifically 'government minister.'

Aklanon **eaewigan** literally means 'width, expanse,' from the adjective root **eawig** 'wide, broad,' but has been used by purists to refer to 'province' in local publications; most Aklanons would know and use the Spanish loan **probinsiya**.

4. HOMOGRAPHY

Homographs are words that are spelled identically, but which have unrelated meanings, sometimes unrelated pronunciations as well, such as English *close* 'near' as opposed to 'shut.' Because of our historical (if not hysterical) orthography, English has homophones as well, words that are spelled and/or derived differently, but pronounced the same, e.g., *raise* vs. *rays*.

Orthographically Xhosa **abafundi** is a noun, the plural of **umfundi**, meaning 'students, pupils; readers (of a publication),' but it is also the negative present third person plural of – **funda**, a verb meaning 'study.' In the context

Abazali, **abafundi** noluntu ngokubanzi ngoku banenxaxheba enkulu ekuphathweni kwezikolo 'Parents, **students**, and society-at-large now have a big role to play in the administration of schools'

a Xhosa consultant got it right in his translation, but in the one-word-per-line vocabulary rendered it as 'they don't study' (i.e., it was out of its immediate context).

More serious still is the lack of tone-marking in Bantu languages. This has led everyone astray – mother-tongue speakers as well as students. Here is the rendition of a few lines of a Sotho praise poem by a language consultant:

Bohlale ho eena ke lelomolo,	Wisdom to him is a vitamin
'Nete ho eena ke semelo ,	Truth to him is an embarrassment
Boitseko ke motsoalle.	Liberty is his friend.

The second line does not construe in the context of *praise*. That translation of **semelo** hinges upon its being a Group 5 (zero-marked) noun formed from the verb **-semela** 'embarrass.' However, it can also be a Group 4 (**se-**) noun formed from the verb **-mela** 'grow (of plant), sprout, germinate' [intransitive] or 'grow something, produce a growth of x' [transitive]. In this

case, **semelo** means 'growth, sprout; [ext] nature, character, standing.' The second line is therefore more accurately rendered 'Truth is **second nature** to him.'

Prof. Antonia Schleicher, who published a *Yoruba Newspaper Reader* through the University of Maryland Eastern Shore and our Dunwoody Press (1998), informed me that tone plays such a high functional load in her language that even Yorubas stumble and err when reading local publications where tone is never marked. According to Peter Ihionu, who is similarly engaged in writing an *Igbo Newspaper Reader* (in progress), the same situation obtains in his language (personal communication).

5. DIFFICULTY OF FINDING WORDS IN A DICTIONARY

In alluding to the "linguistic arrogance" of certain lexicographers, I cannot escape wearing that shoe. I originally had tremendous difficulties in conquering morphophonemic changes in Aklanon and seeing how words so derived could be related. Nevertheless, when I published a dictionary of that language (1969), I put both **ilimnan** 'bar' and **ilimnon** 'beverage' some five pages later under the root **inom** 'drink,' leaving it to the learner to discover what I came to know.

I have yet to meet any student or teacher of Sotho (apart from degreed linguists) who can find the very common word **bokamoso** 'tomorrow' in existing dictionaries where it has been put either under the root **-s-** or the verb **-sa** 'clear up (of weather), end (of night).' This is because it is the result of the compounding of three prefixes: **bo-** [Group 6 singular, often used to form abstract or mass nouns], **ka-** [adverbial marker], and **mo-** [Group 2 singular] and the noun-forming suffix **-o**.

There are, of course, instances where word-formation is absolutely opaque to a native speaker, but not to the language neophyte. Sotho **mpho** 'gift' is regularly derived from the verb **-fa** 'give.' Nouns of Group 5a are formed from a prefix N-, which is sometimes lost, but usually triggers complex morphophonemic changes: **f** > **ph** (**-fetoha** 'change' > **phetoho** 'transformation'), **h** > **kg** (**-halefa** 'become angry' > **kgalefo** 'wrath'), **r** > **th** (**-ruta** 'study' > **thuto** 'education'), etc. In a learner's dictionary, while such words should be cross-referenced to each other, they would be found in alphabetical order as they are derived.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although most of this presentation has been anecdotal, the breadth of exemplification from a number of less-commonly taught languages of the Philippines and of Africa should justify the need for research and funding what must be an essential tool for the American learner. Sadly, there are a large number of foreign languages that have no dictionaries whatsoever. Certainly these should first be serviced with easy-to-understand user-friendly materials. But even with those languages that do have extensive bilingual lexicographic treatments (e.g., Sotho, Yoruba, Xhosa), there is the danger of perceiving that "all has been done," while our students founder in a sea of roots with nowhere to anchor.

7. REFERENCES

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